



Understanding Asthma

Many children in Alabama have asthma. Learning about your asthma can help you live a healthy, enjoyable life.

Each person's asthma is different. One person's asthma may be mild and cause problems only on occasion. Others struggle to breathe on a daily basis. Some people have attacks that require a trip to the hospital while others may have mild, but annoying attacks that can be managed at home. In most cases, people with asthma can expect to have a full life and participate in work, school, sports and other activities.

The most important thing to remember is that asthma is a disease that can be treated. To get the most from your treatment, you need to understand your disease and what you need to do to take care of your asthma.

Here are some things you need to know about your asthma:

Symptoms:

Treatment can improve or prevent asthma symptoms. This is why treating mild symptoms is important to your good health. It is also important to remember the most common symptoms of asthma.

They include:

- A cough that lasts a week or more
- Shortness of breath that continues repeatedly
- Recurring feeling of tightness in your chest
- Recurrent wheezing (a hissing or whistling noise as you exhale)

Many people think wheezing is the only symptom of asthma. The fact is that some people with asthma rarely wheeze. Instead, they may cough at night or after exercise. Knowing what to watch out for can help you manage your asthma.

What causes asthma?

No one knows exactly why some people get asthma and others do not. We now know that asthma tends to run in families and may be linked to allergies. It is not caused by emotional or family problems although stress can affect asthma that was already there. Today, doctors and researchers know more about the airway changes that cause asthma and how to reverse or prevent those changes from taking place.

When asthma develops, three changes take place. The first change is inflammation, followed by constriction or tightening and sensitivity. When all three problems happen at the same time, an attack can occur.

When the airway is inflamed, the tissues become swollen and irritated. As a result, a thick mucus is produced. If this happens often, the tissues may become thickened permanently.

The feeling of tightness is the result of constriction. When this occurs, the muscles around the airways tighten up and cause the airways to become narrow. Another name for this is bronchospasm or bronchoconstriction.

An asthma attack may also be triggered by sensitivity to a variety of things including tobacco smoke, colds and other

viral diseases, cold air, ozone and air pollution, and allergens such as pollen, dust and animal dander.

What is an asthma "attack"?

An asthma attack happens when the airway changes (inflammation, constriction and sensitivity) get worse and breathing becomes difficult. Preventing attacks are very important to the control of asthma. Understanding what happens when an attack occurs can help you control your asthma better. Here are some signs of an attack:

- The flow of air is blocked when the airways swell on the inside and constrict on the outside
- The patient struggles to breathe
- Wheezing or whistling sounds are heard
- The small airways are blocked by thick mucus
- Coughing as the patient tries to clear his lungs

How do I take care of my asthma?

To take care of your asthma, it is important that you work as a team with your doctor. Your doctor will set up an asthma management plan for you to use as a guide to control your asthma. This plan is just for you! When you follow your doctor's plan, you are more likely to avoid

attacks and other problems that can keep you from enjoying life.

There are many different asthma management plans, so be sure you follow your doctor's directions! Action plans may contain basic facts about asthma and asthma medicines, how and when to use your medications, how to monitor your asthma and what to do if you have a problem.

What are the goals for my treatment?

There are two goals for asthma treatment: 1) Prevent symptoms from starting in the first place and 2) Identifying problems or symptoms early, when they are easiest to control.

Following your doctor's written asthma plan will help you prevent asthma-related symptoms and problems. It is very important that you do this even if you are not having any symptoms. In addition to following your personal asthma plan, your doctor may ask you to monitor your lung function at home. You will also receive directions on how to take your medicine if you should have an attack.

When you take care of your asthma, you will receive many benefits:

- Fewer asthma symptoms or attacks
- Fewer times you must go to the doctor or hospital
- Fewer days missed from work or school
- The ability to have an active, healthy life!